

imaging workshop

Perfect hair cutouts



■ Applying a new background to the image on the right involves tracing around the complex hair outline. Luckily, Photoshop makes it surprisingly easy to achieve, enabling us to drop in a new background with ease.



○ Image
Workshop files:
Fuzzy Hair.tif,
Fuzzy Hair Final.tif



Selecting and cutting out hair is one of the trickiest tasks in image editing. Mark Shufflebottom explains the techniques you need to know



If there's one editing technique that can drive even the sanest person up the wall, it's cutting out hair. Yet at some point everyone has the unenviable job of doing it.

The problem is that because hair is so fine, the cutout invariably looks false and contains chunks of background colour. However, Photoshop's Colour Selection and Quick Mask tools are the key to achieving a natural effect.

Last month we looked at the extraction tool for cutting out from a multi-tone image, although most studio shots are taken against a plain background. If you're planning to drop in another background at a later date, there are a few points to take into consideration at the shooting stage.

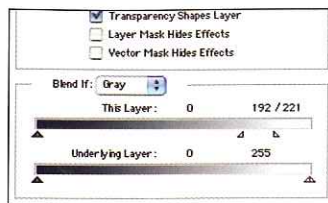
If the model has light-coloured hair, place him or her against a dark background and vice versa – this will provide a cleaner selection. You can even use a blue or green background because these colours don't naturally appear in skin and hair tones, making it far easier to select the backdrop and remove it.

In this tutorial we'll explain how to remove a light grey background using Photoshop's Colour Range tool – the job is pretty straightforward because the background is more or less a continuous tone. When combined with the Quick Mask tool, it's possible to produce seamless cutouts even on tricky areas like hair.

Surprisingly, you don't need to be a Photoshop master to be able to cut out hair effectively. However, it's an invaluable skill to know, and just requires a little editing trickery to produce a seamless result.

Layer style cutouts

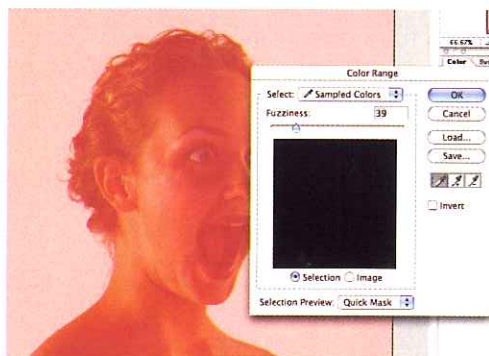
One of the little-known features of Photoshop layers is the ability to remove grey areas. Double-click on the background layer in the Layers palette and change the name from 'Background layer' to 'layer 0' (the reason for this change is that background layers cannot have layer styles applied). Then double-click on the layer in the palette again. At the bottom of the Layer Options screen is an option to blend this layer if it's grey. Drag the top slider up slightly and you'll see the light areas of the image disappear. If the cutout is a little rough, hold Alt and click on the slider – it splits into two. Drag the lower slider back towards white a little to soften the cutout.



It's possible to blend grey layers to produce pretty good photo cutouts.

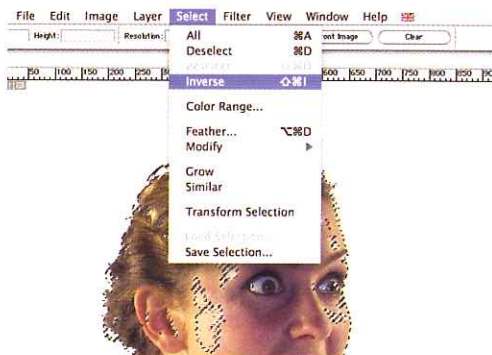
Read up on the Web

Planet Photoshop, at www.planetphotoshop.com, is ideal for picking up more cutout tricks. Unlike so many Web sites out there, this site is firmly focused on bringing information directly to digital shooters. From taking photographs to sorting out problems later, this site covers everything – the tutorials section is sure to help you out with niggly Photoshop problems.



1 Bad hair day

Start Photoshop and load the image that needs cutting out. This model has been photographed against a white background, which makes Photoshop's Color Selection feature the perfect tool for the job. Go to the Selection menu and choose Color Range from the list.



4 Invert the cutout

Click 'OK' to apply the colour selection – you will see the marching ants to show the areas that have been selected. We need to invert the selection because the areas that we've selected are all white. Go to the Select menu and choose Select Inverse.



7 Back to normal

Once you've painted all the highlights, press Q on the keyboard again to exit the Quick Mask mode. If there are any areas on the face that are still selected, just press Q to activate the Quick Mask again and paint them out. Now choose Select Inverse from the Select menu.



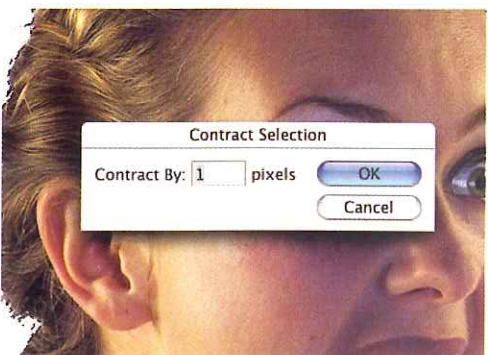
2 Selection settings

In the Color Range window, set the selection preview to Quick Mask and make sure the 'Selection' box below the preview photograph is ticked. Click on a white area of the image in the preview window – most of the white background area will be instantly selected.



5 Red-faced

Once the selection is inverted, we need to sort out the highlight details that have been selected on the model's face. The best way to do this is using Photoshop's Quick Mask. Press Q on the keyboard to activate the Quick Mask – you'll see the girl's face turn red to show that the mask is active.



8 Contract the shot

We need to contract the selection slightly to avoid any excess white areas getting through. Go to the Select menu and choose Modify > Contract. In the pop-up window, type 1 in the box, then click OK. Now press Ctrl + C to copy and Ctrl + V to paste the selection. This creates a new layer.



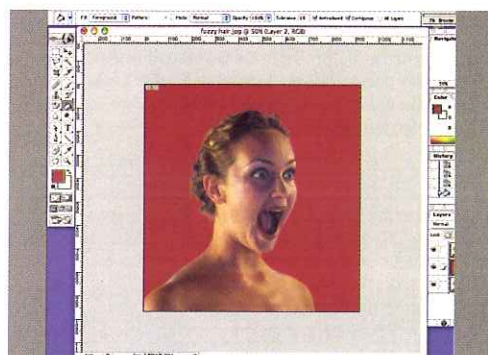
3 Feeling fuzzy

Change the Fuzziness setting by dragging the slider at the top of the window to around 99. This will allow some detail of the face to come through in the preview window. We don't want any white background 'sticking' to the hair selection, and this is a great way to remove it.



6 Paint it black

Select black as the foreground colour in the toolbar and choose a medium brush – try to avoid one with soft edges for this task. Now paint over all the highlights on the face. It can be confusing painting with black when the result is red, but black adds to the mask, while white removes parts of it.



9 Perfect selection

Create another new layer by clicking on the New Layer icon in the palette. Drag this new layer below the copy of the head, then choose the Paint Bucket tool and select a suitable colour to fill the layer. You can now see how good the cutout is.